



40 EPA cuts Libby workers' wages

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced Thursday, Jan. 22, 2004, that it is cutting the hourly wages of most of its asbestos workers in Libby.

Jim Christiansen, a representative of the federal agency, issued a letter and pay comparison charts to explain the wage cuts. He could not be reached for comment.

The letter from Mr. Christiansen said, "The EPA and the U.S. Department of Transportation Volpe Center are currently changing the wage rates for EPA cleanup contractors working under through the Volpe Center on the Libby Project. This summary [letter] provides a brief discussion of why the

wages are being changed, the rationale, and the scope of the change.

The letter directly addressed the question of why the wages are being cut.

"EPA considered lowering wage rates to ensure the cleanup is conducted as efficiently and quickly as possible. We understand that a reduced wage is not attractive to individual workers and may cause hardships. However, we feel it is imperative to get as much cleanup done as possible with the money available. This change will not mean less money spent on cleanup, nor will it mean less money spent in Libby. It will mean

more workers can be employed and more cleanups can be accomplished with the money available. We project that this change will reduce cleanup costs by approximately 20 percent, allowing us to employ 20 percent more people and clean up 20 percent more homes with a given budget. If we find that we cannot attract and retain skilled workers from the local labor pool, we will reevaluate our wage rates.

Mr. Christiansen's letter cited federal law that covers employees' wages.

"The Libby Asbestos Project is

(see EPA on page 2)

Position	Category	Current Rate	New Rate
Interior Cleanup Person	Laborer	24.29	14.00
Exterior Cleanup Person	Laborer	24.29	14.00
Outside Support Person	Laborer	24.29	14.00
Interior Restoration Person	Carpenter	29.38	18.00
Vac Truck Driver	Truck Driver	26.00	14.00
Water Truck Driver	Truck Driver	26.00	14.00
Equipment Manager/Runner	Truck Driver	26.00	16.00
Excavator Operator	Operator	26.76	17.00
Boom Lift Operator	Operator	26.76	17.00
Skid Steer Loader Operator	Operator	26.76	17.00
Tractor Operator	Operator	26.76	17.00

THE MONTANIAN

Libby MT 59923

Wednesday

JAN 28 2004

Superior Clipping Service

Glendive MT 406-377-6612

EPA

a federally funded and operated project, so the wage rates for all field workers are governed by the Davis Bacon Wage Act. The Davis Bacon Act stipulates wage categories (i.e. laborer, carpenter, truck driver etc.) and rates on a State and County basis. Lincoln County in Montana has 4 separate wage rate schedules. They are: highway, heavy construction, commercial building, and residential construction.

"For the past 4 years the cate-

gory of 'heavy construction' was used to determine the relevant wage rates for the Libby Asbestos Project. This assessment was based primarily on work that was performed at the former screening plant site and vermiculite mine, which involved heavy equipment operations. Specifically, this involved the operation of large-scale excavators, mining trucks, dozers, and graders; all of the equipment one typically sees in use on a heavy construction type project.

"The current scope of work, cleanup of residential homes and small businesses, involves tasks more typical of 'residential construction' activities. The closest labor rate in the residential construc-

tion schedule is too low to attract and retain skilled workers from the local labor pool. So, some other method must be used to determine a fair and reasonable rate for the workers performing cleanup on the homes in the Libby area.

"In developing a new wage rate, we considered the following information:

"There is no labor classification for an 'abatement worker' or 'hazardous materials handler' in any of the Davis Bacon Wage Rate Schedules in Montana as there are in other jurisdictions.

"The labor classification for this type of worker in other federal jurisdictions in several states is approximately \$15/hr including

fringe benefits.

"A limited survey of companies doing business in the Libby, Montana area showed a wage range of \$12 to \$15/hr for the closest labor classification that would attract and retain workers.

"Based on this assessment the range of \$12 to \$15 per hour appears to be fair and reasonable for employees working on residential cleanups in the Libby, Montana area.

"In instances where our work requires the use of heavy equipment, such as at the mine, the landfill, or other large-scale excavation areas, the applicable rates for heavy construction will apply."